

<b>5 July 2011</b>		<b>ITEM 5</b>
<b>Children's Services Overview &amp; Scrutiny Committee</b>		
<b>CHILDREN'S CENTRE CONSULTATION</b>		
<b>Report of:</b> Carmel Littleton, Head of Learning and Universal Outcomes		
<b>Wards and communities affected:</b> All	<b>Key Decision:</b> Yes	
<b>Accountable Head of Service:</b> Carmel Littleton, Head of Learning and Universal Outcomes		
<b>Accountable Director:</b> Jo Olsson, Director of Children, Education and Families		
<b>This report is</b> public		
<b>Purpose of Report:</b> To update members on the consultation on changes to Children's Centre delivery across Thurrock		

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Changes in public sector funding have significantly reduced resources in this area and a service review has also shown a need to refocus resources on supporting families who are experiencing difficulties.

The Childcare Act 2006 sets out the key duties on Local Authorities with regard to Children's Centres. Cabinet agreed in March 2011 to consult on changes to delivery enabling the local authority to meet its statutory duties.

The consultation runs from 13th June 2011 to 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2011 and focuses on three areas:

- Changes to the services offered in children's centres;
- Proposals to change the management of four centres;
- The closure or change of use of six centres.

Following the consultation a further report will be made to Cabinet on recommendations for the future delivery of Children's Centres in Thurrock.

## **1. RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- 1.1 That members consider and advise on options as a key part of the consultation.
- 1.2 That members promote the consultation
- 1.3 That a task and finish group is established and a meeting planned for August to make recommendations to Cabinet in October, when the responses to the consultation will have been received.

## **2. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND:**

- 2.1 The Childcare Act 2006 sets out the key duties on local authorities with regard to children's centres and these are:
  - To improve the wellbeing of young children in their area and reduce inequalities between them;
  - To make arrangement to secure that early childhood services are provided in an integrated way to maximise the benefits of those services to young children and their parents.
- 2.2 The Act also places a duty on local authorities to ensure that consultation, as they think appropriate, is carried out before any of the following changes take place:
  - Making arrangements for the provision of a new children's centre
  - Making any significant change in the services provided through an existing children's centre
  - Doing anything which would result in a children's centre ceasing to be a children's centre, i.e. closing it or reducing the services provided to such an extent that it no longer meets the definition of a Sure Start Children's Centre.
- 2.3 There are currently 15 Children's Centres in Thurrock and currently all of these are Local Authority run and managed. The recent restructure of the Children, Education and Families Directorate has resulted in the reorganisation of management and administration functions and this has resulted in some initial savings without impacting on front line services. Children's Centres were, in the past funded by a ring fenced revenue grant; this grant has now ceased. The net effect is a very significant reduction in resources available to run children's centres.
- 2.4 Across Children's Services we have reviewed the support available to vulnerable groups and those families who need additional support, this has identified that Children's Centres do not provide a high level of services to these groups.
- 2.5 Members are referred to the report to Cabinet in March 2011 where approval was given to consult on a reduction in the number of Local Authority run

centres to five and on alternative models of provision for a further four by commissioning third party providers (schools, third sector, private providers).

### **3. ISSUES AND/OR OPTIONS:**

- 3.1 The consultation began on 13<sup>th</sup> June 2011 and focuses on three areas:
- Changes to the services offered in children's centres;
  - Proposals to change the management of four centres;
  - The closure or change of use of six centres.
- 3.2 The consultation seeks to inform the public and seek their views on the changes to the delivery of children's centres in Thurrock.
- 3.3 The consultation will involve a range of methods to ensure differing needs are taken into account and to focus on ensuring groups who are seldom heard participate in the consultation. A summary of the consultation methods used is included in appendix one.
- 3.4 The consultation is based on the principles set out in the Thurrock Community Engagement Toolkit. By working with partners, particularly those from voluntary and community groups, we will seek to encourage participation from groups who do not currently access Children's Centres.
- 3.5 The consultation will close on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2011 and following this the outcome and recommendations will be presented to Cabinet in October 2011, changes will be implemented by 1<sup>st</sup> April 2012.

### **4. CONSULTATION (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)**

- 4.1 Cabinet has given agreement to consult and both the Labour and Conservative groups have been briefed on the consultation. In addition the proposals have been presented to the Children's Partnership Board and engagement with partners has already commenced.

### **5. IMPACT ON CORPORATE POLICIES, PRIORITIES, PERFORMANCE AND COMMUNITY IMPACT**

- 5.1 This consultation will inform recommendations that will assist in the delivery of the following Council priorities:
- to improve the education and skills of local people
  - to encourage and promote job creation and economic prosperity
  - to provide and commission high quality and accessible services that meet, wherever possible, individual needs

## 6. IMPLICATIONS

### 6.1 Financial

- 6.1.1 Implications verified by: **Meinir Hall**  
 Telephone and email: **01375 652147**  
**mhall@thurrock.gov.uk**

There are no direct financial implications arising from the consultation as the cost of the consultation will be met from existing resources and is largely staff time. Once the outcome and recommendations of the review are known any financial implications will then be identified and costed.

### 6.2 Legal

- 6.2.1 Implications verified by: **Lindsey Marks**  
 Telephone and email: **01375 652054**  
**lmarks@thurrock.gov.uk**

- 6.2.2 The Childcare Act 2006 places a statutory duty on local authorities to ensure that consultation, as they think is appropriate, is carried out before any of the following changes takes place:

- Making arrangements for the provision of a new children's centre
- Making any significant change in the services provided through an existing children's centre
- Doing anything which would result in a children's centre ceasing to be a children's centre, i.e. closing it or reducing the services provided to such an extent that it no longer meets the definition of a Sure Start Children's Centre.

- 6.2.3 The legal team have advised on the consultation to ensure we meet the requirements of the Childcare Act 2006 and as the consultation lasts until 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2011 it can be considered to be of sufficient length to meet the requirements of the Act.

### 6.3 Diversity and Equality

- 6.3.1 Implications verified by: **Samson DeAlyn**  
 Telephone and email: **01375 652472**  
**sdealyn@thurrock.gov.uk**

- 6.3.2 An Equality Impact Assessment has been completed following advice provided by the Diversity Team. The consultation seeks to engage participation from across the community and the range of methods will support responses. A further Equality Impact Assessment will be undertaken

to assess the impact of the recommendations once the consultation closes and this will be an integral part of the report to Cabinet.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

- 7.1 We are committed to delivering high quality, effective services that make best use of the resources available. This consultation will enable us to make recommendations to Cabinet on the best way to develop Children's Centres in the future whilst meeting the statutory requirements of the Childcare Act 2006.

### **BACKGROUND PAPERS USED IN PREPARING THIS REPORT:**

- Report to Cabinet, March 2011

### **APPENDICES TO THIS REPORT:**

- Appendix one – summary of consultation methods
- Appendix two – map of current Children's Centres

### **REPORT AUTHOR CONTACT DETAILS:**

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